

FLYING HIGH AGAIN:

MISSISSIPPI GUARDSMAN PARACHUTE TEAM

By MAJ Danny N. Blanton

In every walk of life, there are a select few individuals who embody the finest in their field. They are the best of the best.

In sports, you have the all-stars. In law enforcement, you have SWAT teams. In the United States Navy, you have the SEALs, and in the United States Army Special Operations, you have the Black Daggers.

An elite parachute team comprised solely of soldiers from the United States Army Special Operations Command (USASOC), the Black Daggers are infants when compared to the older, highly-revered United States Army Golden Knights. That's probably why Lt. Gen. Bryan D. Brown, commander of USASOC, based at Ft. Bragg, N.C., went to the Golden Knights to bring in one of their more experienced team leaders when he decided to create his own elite parachute team.

He found his man in Sgt. 1st Class Johnny Mulford, a long-time Mississippi Guardsman who joined the Golden Knights in 1995. At that time, Mulford was the first non-active component soldier to be invited to join the demonstration team.

The Wiggins native joined the Mississippi Army National Guard's 2nd Battalion, 20th Special Forces Group, based in Jackson, in 1982. He continued as a traditional guardsman until 1988, when he was hired as a federal technician with Support Company, 2nd Battalion, 20th Special Forces Group. This gave him his opportunity to go to Airborne School, and thus began a love

affair with jumping from airplanes.

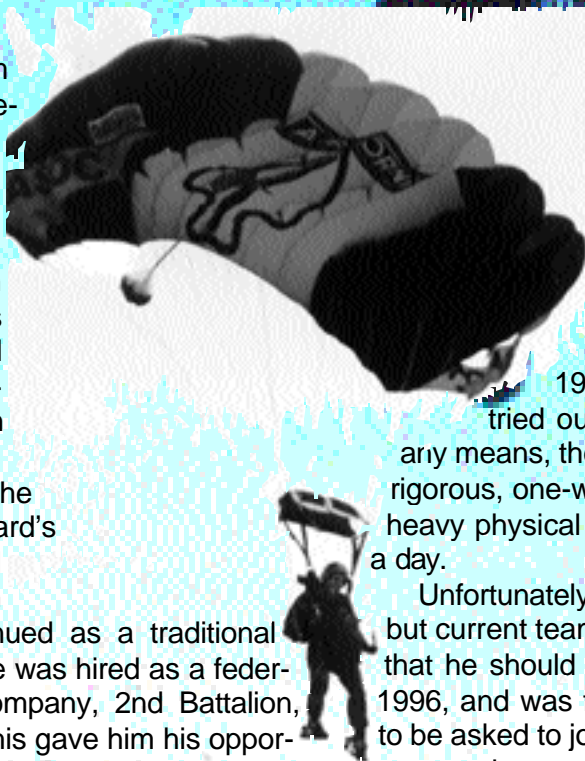
He left the Special Forces in 1990 to accept an Active Guard/Reserve position on the M60A3 Net Team at Camp Shelby, which he held until 1992. He then transferred to Company B, 2nd Battalion, 198th Armor, headquartered in Indianola, as Readiness NCO and Master Gunner.

After a year, the airborne itch hit him again, and he transferred back to the Special Forces as 2nd Battalion's Supply Sergeant. It was during this period that Mulford was introduced to military free fall parachuting during a demonstration performed by members of Mississippi's Special Forces Battalion.

"I saw Capt. Brewer and Capt. Coleman do a free-fall jump, and I immediately knew that was something I wanted to do," Mulford explained. "Capt. Brewer took me down to Magee and gave me my first instruction in free fall jumping. After, that, I continued to drive down and jump as often as I could."

Within a year, he had reached the minimum number of required free fall jumps (500) to try out for the Golden Knights, the U.S. Army's premier parachute team. So, in 1995, he traveled to Ft. Bragg and tried out for the team. No cake walk by any means, the tryout for the Golden Knights is a rigorous, one-week indoctrination, which includes heavy physical training and up to a dozen jumps a day.

Unfortunately, his first attempt ended in injury, but current team members informally told Mulford that he should definitely try again. He did so in 1996, and was first non-active component soldier to be asked to join the team. Naturally this was an opportunity too good to pass up, even if it meant



Sgt. 1st Class Johnny Mulford



FORMS ELITE

leaving his home state of Mississippi.

"At that time you had to be on active duty to be an active member of the team, and that's the only reason I left the National Guard," he said.

He served as a parachutist for three years before becoming a team leader in 1999. During his tenure with the Golden Knights, Mulford made several high-profile jumps, which included jumping into Yankee Stadium on the Army's birthday, and jumping into the Lincoln Memorial Plaza during President George W. Bush's inauguration last year.

Not all his jumps have been easy, according to the veteran parachutist. He described one jump into Chelsea Barracks in London as especially tricky. "We were doing a type of jump known as a tri-by-side, which are three parachutists descending online," he said. "It was very windy, which made descent very difficult. Factor in the small size of the area we were jumping into, and it was even more difficult. You had to be on target."

None of his jumps compare to a scare that occurred during a jump into a Triple-A baseball stadium in Lansing, Mich. The jump was difficult by nature to begin with, which involved one parachutist on top of another. Mulford was on top, and when the parachute under him opened, the parachute chord and material wrapped around his neck and face, cutting him badly and strangling him. Fortunately, the lower parachutist saw what had happened and "cut away" his parachute, and opened his reserve.

"By the time I came to, I was 200 feet above the field," Mulford explained. "Another second longer and who knows what would have happened."

The apparent danger still doesn't diminish the thrill of the jump, and people worldwide flock to see these master parachutists who will flirt with disaster by falling over two miles in one minute.

That is why parachute teams have been created for such commands as the 82nd Airborne Division, based at Ft. Bragg, the 101st Airborne Division at Ft.

Campbell, Ky., and now USASOC.

This became another challenge for Mulford, who upon his transfer to the Special Operations Command was not only the Non-Commissioned Officer in Charge, but also the only member of the new Black Daggers. He went to work immediately, developing a standard operating procedure and show schedule for the team, as well as designing uniforms and parachutes. He also began recruiting parachutists.

With the only firm requirements for membership being a member of a USASOC subordinate unit and a minimum of 50 free fall jumps, Mulford went to work putting his team together. Today, the team has 24 total members.

Among the most active members of the team stand three Mississippians, each unique in their own way. First is Mulford, followed by Master Sgt. Mark Jones of Biloxi, who spent the past few years as the Senior Enlisted Aide to Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Henry Shelton.

Also on the new team is a Mississippian who, like Mulford, came up through the Mississippi Army National Guard. However, Staff Sgt. Jody Beck of Jackson, Training NCO for Support Company of the Jackson-based Special Forces Battalion, is the first Guardsman to serve on an elite Army Parachute Team as a Guardsman. Beck, who joined the Mississippi National Guard in 1993, is the only member of the Black Daggers not stationed at Ft. Bragg.

A long-time associate of Mulford's, Beck was recruited by the veteran for the Black Daggers upon the team's creation. Although unique, the geographical distance from the rest of his team has been a challenge. Beck flies to Ft. Bragg once a month to practice with the team, and pays his own way to each of their shows. Despite the inconvenience, Beck said he wouldn't trade the experience.

"I'm tickled to death," he said of being on the team. "I'm going to do it as long as I can."

Although the team is loaded with experience,

including two former Golden Knights beside Mulford, the Mississippi influence can't be denied. This was evident when they made their first public jump in Tupelo. This was especially poignant for the Mississippians on the team.

"To reach this point, and be able to demonstrate our proficiency to our home state was very special," Mulford said. "I hope that was the first of many jumps at home."

Just the opportunity to jump at that level is enough for Beck, who described a Black Dagger practice as often including 22 jumps in one day.

"I thought I was good until I went to practice," he said. "This is a different level of jumping. I can't imagine anyone not wanting to do this."

According to Mulford, desire is the most important criteria for a prospective Black Dagger. As with Beck, Mulford insists that traditional Guardsmen are encouraged to try out.

"If you do a lot of accuracy jumps, and make sure you're in good shape, then you have a shot at being a Black Dagger," he said. Mulford, who made his first free fall jump eight years ago, now has over 5,000 to his credit. Still, he says he wouldn't be where he is today if not for the Mississippi Guard.

"The Mississippi National Guard gives you the opportunity to do whatever you want, whether it be airborne school, air assault school, or special forces," he said. "If not for the Mississippi National Guard, I wouldn't be where I am right now."

A former member of the Mississippi National Guard Marathon Team, Mulford has gained the respect of peers and superiors alike. The captain who first introduced him to free fall

jumping almost a decade ago, the current Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations Col. Allen Brewer, said he has seen Mulford's ability first hand.

"Whatever he sets out to do, whether it's parachuting, or tank

gunnery, Johnny's going to do what it takes to excel," Brewer said. "Anything he sets out to do, he's going to do it well."

If it's up to these men in black, who pierce the sky as daggers,

